

VA Police Receive Training in Mental Health Interventions

by Dr. Frank G. Jordan Jr., VHA-CM

Policing in the 21st century VA requires knowing the psychological issues that Veterans contend with, and the CVVAMC Police are training to learn how to deal with mental health issues that affect their Veterans.

Carl Vinson VA Medical Center police officers have completed training intended to help them more effectively respond to incidents involving persons in mental health crisis.

The training, mandated by the VA's Deputy Under Secretary for Health



CVVAMC police officers learn how to deal with mental health issues facing Veterans

Operations and Management, was designed in collaboration with VA's Veterans Justice Outreach program, Mental Health division, and the VA Law Enforcement Training Center. The interdisciplinary training was structured so that VA police officers would benefit from knowledge in a variety of disciplines drawing from areas as diverse as psychology, social work, and criminal justice. Designed to complement VA's new

Veterans Justice Outreach program which seeks to assist veterans who have become involved with the criminal justice system, the VA deputy secretary has mandated that all VA police officers

complete the training by June of this year. According to Chief Rod McNeil who runs the Dublin VA Police Department and served as an instructor, the new training initiative is timely.

"Police officers regularly come into contact with people in mental health crisis, so being prepared is smart for everyone in the profession," he said. "In our case, the training is exceptionally important because we know that many of our Veterans will return with mental health concerns that our VA police will encounter virtually every day. By making it a multi-disciplinary approach, we know that our officers will have the training needed to help keep the focus where it belongs, on getting our veterans to the healthcare that they need."

Dublin VA Mental Health director Dr. Matthew Geyer affirmed McNeil's remarks. "In the past, VA Police and VA Mental Health have sometimes appeared to operate with different objectives in mind. Although we've always enjoyed a strong collaborative arrangement, ambiguity sometimes get in the way of ensuring the best approach toward meeting veterans' needs. This new training not only gives our police

the skills that they need, it installs a more cohesive and comprehensive approach for responding to veterans in mental health crisis.”

McNeil and his assistant chief, Captain Torrance Jones, received training as instructors before teaching their police officers and were assisted by Dublin VA social workers Candace Shepherd and Sally Watson-Hall. The 4-day training taught Dublin VA police officers how to identify people who might be in mental health crisis, de-escalation and conflict resolution skills, and techniques and strategies for successfully resolving incidents. The officers were also provided additional resources for assisting veterans and others experiencing difficulties related to mental health issues. Working collaboratively with other agencies and professions for the best outcomes was emphasized.

VA police sergeant Verlis Pooler, himself a veteran, was impressed with the training. “We’ve always worked hard to get our veterans to the healthcare that they need,”



Chief McNeil discusses the implications of Veterans mental health needs with his officers



Social worker Candace Shepherd instructs VA Police in mental health intervention techniques

Pooler said, referring to his police department, “but this training gave us critical skills that we need to get the best resolutions. This may be the best training I’ve had as a police officer.”

McNeil said that this initial training is just the beginning and that the process for educating his police officers in mental health interventions will be continually revised and refined as more is learned about dealing with persons in mental health crisis and veterans’ evolving needs.

“One thing you learn early as a police officer is that constant training is mandatory if you want to remain current, and in our police department, we insist on remaining current,” McNeil explained. “Few issues that VA police officers deal with are as critical as interacting effectively with veterans in mental health crisis. In the end, we owe it to them to be as prepared as we possibly can be so that we can honor their service and empower their health.” •